# Background: BAHREIN

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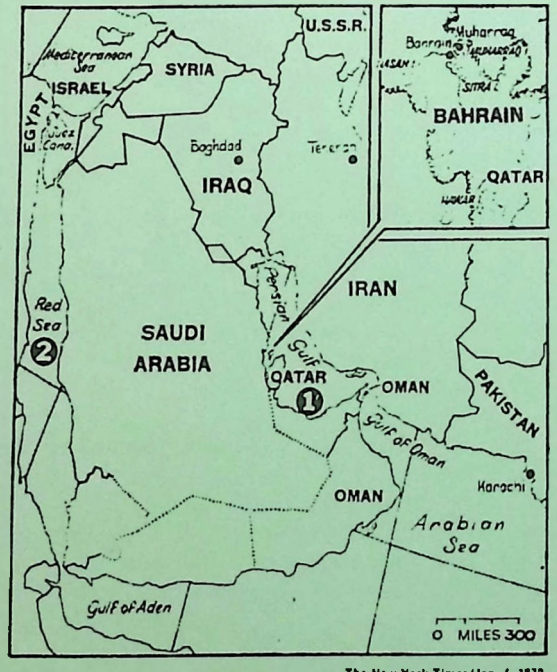
Bahrein is a complex of islands half way up the Gulf, near Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Its two main islands are Manama, the largest and Moharraq. They are linked by a causeway at either end of which are the two main towns. Manama is the capital, while Moharraq is the site of the RAF and civilian air base. The ruling family are the al-Khalifa, relatives of the Kuwaiti ruling family, the al-Sabah, both of whom occupied their states in the second half of the 18th century. Since 1956 the al-Khalifa have lived in a special village, Rifa'a-al-Gharbi, inhabited only by the ruling family and their Beduin guards; they are too afraid of the people to live in Manama itself. The 220,000 population of Bahrein are mainly of Iranian origin, but most have been born in Bahrein, speak Arabic and have Bahreini nationality. A minority of the population are of Indian and Pakistani origin; there are also Omani workers, and a 3000 strong British colony.

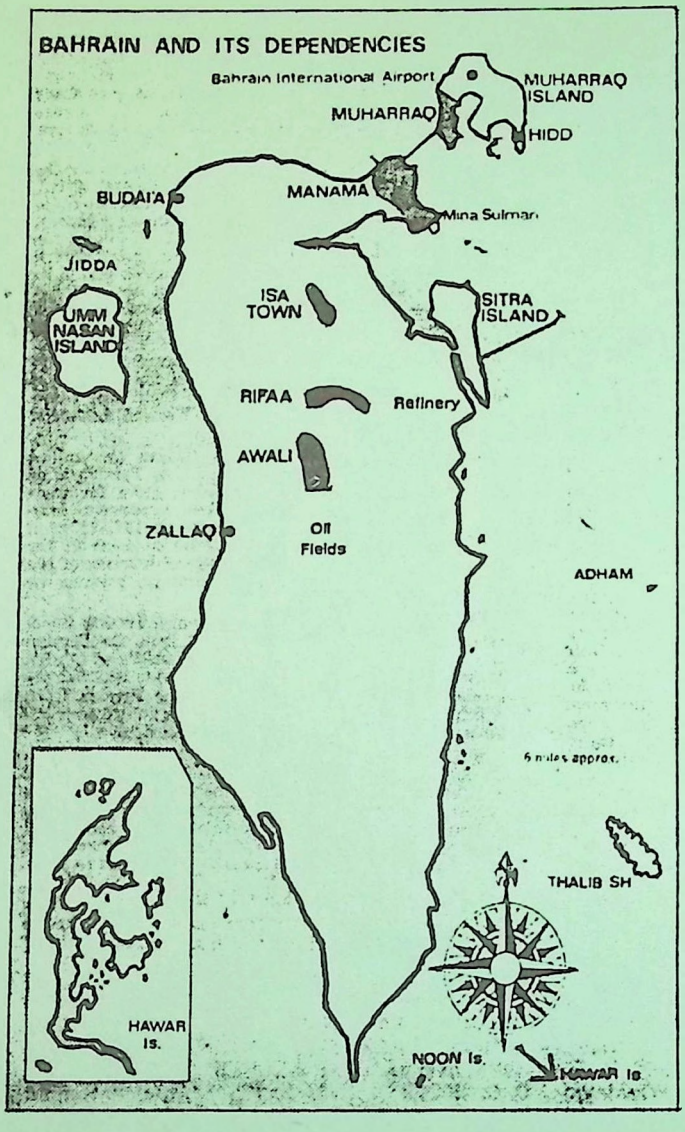



The New York Times/Jan. 6, 1972

The British have ruled Bahrein since the 19th century; officially they merely "protected" the ruler, but in fact they run the state, organising the police and the administration. In addition, the al-Khalifa family relied on Britain to keep them in power, as in 1956 and again in 1965 when the masses rose in rebellion. The British have an army base at Hamala (now abandoned), an RAF base at Moharraq and a naval base at Jufair both of which are still being used; the US navy also has installations at Jufair.

Before the discovery of oil in the 1930's, Bahrein's economy depended on trade, pearl-diving, dates (grown in the palm-plantations around Manama) and fishing. In the 1930's two US firms, Standard Oil of California and Texaco, set up the Bahrein Petroleum Company (BAPCO), which they registered in Canada to avoid the ban on non-British firms having rights in British colonies. BAPCO built a European town at Awali, near the oil fields in the center of the town, and a refinery on the northern coast. But Bahrein's oil production is low and will run out by by 1990; Bahrein produces around 4 million tons of petrol a year and 2/3 of the 12 million tons of crude oil required for the production of the refinery comes by pipeline from Saudi Arabia. Other economic activities now include: an aluminum smelter, Alba, using gas from the oilfields to manufacture aluminum out of material brought from Australia; a satellite communications center, and a fishing project, run by a British company. British construction firms have also been riding the economic boom: Wimpey recently finished construction of a 35,000 population town, IsaTown. The problem is that the rents are too high and IsaTown is too far from places of work so the town is now half-empty.

Bahrein's history is marked by savage political repression. In 1954-56 a Committee of National Unity developed, calling for a share in power between the Sheikh and the people. It organized a famous demonstration against the visit of British Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd and opposed the invasion of Suez, but its leaders were arrested and deported to St. Helena, and its demands were ignored A State of Emergency was declared. The British run the CID and deployed a savage police force, few of whom were Bahreinis. Then in March 1965 BAPCO sacked 1300 workers in an attempt to crush the labor force and stock their installations with Indian workers. This




led to a general strike throughout Bahrein. The demands of the people included: the right to organize the trade unions, cancellation of the BAPCO dismissals, free press and freedom to meet, and the lifting of the State of Emergency proclaimed in 1956. The government replied as ferociously as in 1956. Over 1000 people were arrested and for 5 more years the masses were held down. Then in 1970 there was a new wave of strikes. In the aluminum plants the construction contractor was getting around 4 Bahreini dinars per day (1 BD = approximately $2.40) from Alba for every worker on the site, while the workers were being paid only 900 fils (1000 fils = 1 BD). The workers struck, but only won a slight increase in pay and conditions. There were also strikes among the staff of Gulf Aviation and of Cable and Wireless. But all parties, unions and criticism are banned in Bahrein. When the UN carried out a "consultation" of the Bahreini people in March 1970 to see whether they wanted to be part of Iran or not, the UN mediator "consulted" a "list" of Bahreini organisations. Not one of these was a union.

The political system rested on the Sheikh, his family and the British. A few local merchants have now been co-opted into a pseudo-cabinet, the State Council, but this is mere window-dressing. The Declaration of Bahreini "independence" in August was preceded by more repression. Poets like Qassem Haddad, the trades unionists in Gulf Aviation, and the leaders of the Bahreini Students League (active in Kuwait) were arrested. The British have always pretended that they are not responsible for this system; but they are, because they have built and preserved it, and the al-Khalifa tyranny is functional to the "stability" of imperialist economic and strategic interests.

The reporting in the British press about Bahrein has been marked by consistent complacency and omission of the real situation. Numerous articles on the economic progress and folkloristic attraction of Bahrein have contrasted with an almost complete silence on the political situation or on the fake character of the UN "consultation" and the 1971 "independence". This faithfully reflects the rotten ideology of the British community in Bahrein itself. As one British official is quoted as saying: "It's quite a nice place, actually, rather like India used to be ... This place attracts the kind of Englishman whose roots are in Victorian times. But those roots have no proper soil in England now. We have a very clubby atmosphere here, some of us would feel a bit lost in the Britain of today." (*"Troops Will Leave, but Many Britons Won't Forsake the Charms of Bahrein"*, *New York Times*, *April 14, 1971*). The British are grouped in a special British Club, formerly the Gymkhana Club, from which all but the most complicit Bahreinis are excluded. Bahrein will continue to be a secure base for imperialism in the Gulf after the formal withdrawal of British troops. The new defense treaty will ensure continued British backing for the Bahrein Defense Force, recently purged of Nationalist officers, and British capital will continue its investment in the Bahreini economy. The US is also involved. In May Sheikh Hamid bin Isa, Bahrein's Defense Chief, left for a year's training at the Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, USA. It will be difficult for Bahrein on its own to break out of this system since it is economically and geographically so tightly integrated into Saudi Arabia. But, as the recent wave of arrests shows, the population refuses to accept this regime. It is a neo-colonialist structure, imposed on the Bahreini people by Britain, the US and the oil monopolies.